

Post modernist approach to interpretation

- Hermeneutics and postmodernism are movements which are in continuity.
- It is the reaction against the Enlightenment criterion of neutral, objective and universal reason as the ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning
- Postmodernism, a contemporary form of philosophical skepticism, only finds expression in the second half of the twentieth century.

- One of the 'hermeneuts of suspicion,' namely, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), radically proposed that "there are no truths, only interpretations."
- postmodernists stress the reality of diverse interpretive frameworks rather than the validity of universal standpoints, systems or rationality itself.
- Nietzsche further argued that human beings are fundamentally driven by a "will to power," which is subtly suppressed by different social mechanisms, including religion.
- Postmodernists highlight the role of power which is latent in the way language and consciousness are constructed

- Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) radically overturned the subject-object epistemology at the basis of much of the Western rationalist and scientific outlook. For Heidegger, both subject and object entail one another, so that human knowledge is always a situated, contextual, limited and existentially-based knowledge.
- As a consequence of this, the Cartesian ego or independent, autonomous subject—sacrosanct in Modern Philosophy—could no longer retain its status as the source and origin of meaning and purpose

- Instead, it was one's *Sitz im Leben* or situation in life which determined the contents of consciousness. This radical subversion of the subject in favour of a community-constituted consciousness was to become one of the main tenets of postmodern belief.
- Postmodernism was also influenced by the 'structuralism' of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Saussure drove a wedge between the world of 'signifiers' (words, images, signs) and the world of the 'signified' (the conceptual reality they refer to), by arguing that signifiers are arbitrary and do not have a specific or necessary relationship with the concepts signified by them.

- Poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)— one of the foremost postmodern thinkers— would take structuralism to its logical conclusion by arguing that there is a perpetual differentiation between words.
- In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argues that a word necessarily refers to another word for its meaning (this constitutes 'différence' or a difference between words). But when this happens, meaning is always deferred or postponed (this constitutes 'différance' or a perpetual suspension of meaning). All of this makes it impossible for oral or written communication to successfully represent any state of reality in an objective and universal manner.

- Derrida's intention was to demonstrate that speech or discourse or even written texts cannot represent reality—a presupposition that he termed 'logocentrism'—as there will necessarily be a 'slippage' or ambiguity of meaning even in speech. Indeed, the role of the postmodern approach is to deconstruct texts—starting with philosophical texts which assumedly deal with truth and reality—in order to show that there is no exact correspondence between the world of linguistic signs and the posited real world

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- He showed how institutional parameters have changed in different historical contexts, especially in the areas of crime, psychological disorders (‘madness) and sexual mores. Foucault first presented the ‘archeology’—an objective and descriptive examination—of these systems, especially in his works on madness, e.g., *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and on knowledge in general, e.g., *The Order of Things* (1966)